PLAYING TO LEARN

The Parent Child Package (PCP) program provides learning-readiness opportunities to Jordan's children and an invaluable opportunity for mothers.

Iman Ramadan confessed that she learned how to hold a baby by seeing it done on TV. "Life can be very demanding. Whatever tips we can get, we like." Soon after moving to Jordan from Egypt when she was 15, Iman married and started having children. Now a mother of four, this 24 year old has to delicately balance household chores, farming, and raising her children. Similar to her young children, Iman has learned by trial and error.

Although education is mandatory in Jordan starting in the first grade, kindergarten is not. In 2000, there were only a handful of public kindergartens in the country. Since then, the Ministry of Education (MoE) has put considerable resources into early childhood education and by 2012, there were 920 kindergartens operated by the MoE. As part of the government of Jordan's Education Reform for a Knowledge Economy (ERfKE), Ministry officials and development partners are improving access to and quality of essential early childhood education services. Since 2004, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has been the biggest supporter of the MoE to achieve its ERfKE early childhood education goals.

The perception of the importance of early childhood education in Jordan is also changing. The early years in children's lives are critical to later academic achievement. Research has proven that exposing children to a variety of quality stimuli at a young age will have positive long term cognitive, emotional, and social effects. Jordanians have traditionally considered kindergarten to be an "extra" that is offered only by private schools; now they are pleasantly surprised that their government is opening free public kindergartens. Enrollment rates have skyrocketed in the last few years throughout the Kingdom. Mothers like Iman are trying to enroll their children early and waiting eagerly to find out if their children are admitted. Currently, the demand for kindergarten far exceeds the supply. Many children who try to enroll in kindergarten are turned away.

As a result, programs like the USAID Education Reform Support Program (ERSP) are experimenting with innovative ways to fill the gap. In addition to enhancing the physical learning environments of over 350 kindergartens and building the capacity of kindergarten teachers, ERSP engages parents to support the learning and school readiness of their children at home. For mothers like Iman whose children were not admitted to kindergarten, ERSP has developed the Parent Child Package (PCP) initiative. This program offers a high-quality educational experience with trained teachers for children who did not have the opportunity to attend kindergarten. Simultaneously, these children's mothers are trained on strategies they can use at home to promote their children's school readiness.

The logic behind PCP is that mothers are the primary teachers of their children. If kindergarten-aged children are not able to experience kindergarten first-hand, mothers need to provide this foundation. Conducted with USAID funds, a 2012 evaluation of the PCP intervention revealed that students were 5 percentage points more likely to score well on the Learning Readiness Assessment tool than children who did not receive the intervention. It also showed that the PCP program had significant effects on self-awareness and alertness to surroundings, verbal and communication skills, and physical development.

Although Iman's six year old son, Deyaa, was not among those selected for kindergarten, he was given the opportunity to have a kindergarten experience through the PCP program. Deyaa was able to interact with trained teachers, meet other children, enjoy a renovated physical space, and play with educational toys and materials. During the ten sessions, children cover kindergarten curriculum topics such as letter identification and counting, as well
tiles in her kitchen to teach Deyaa to recognize what these numbers look like. Although Deyaa is Iman’s youngest child, she admits that this is the first time she felt the confidence to help any of her children with school work or learning readiness.

The training for mothers to support best practices at home has had positive effects on other family members. Many mothers reported feeling more confident in their abilities to parent, let alone improve specific results of their child’s growth. In focus group discussions after the training, mothers agreed overwhelmingly that the techniques they learned in the PCP training are helping them improve communication with all family members. Although storytelling has always been a traditional part of Jordanian childrearing, mothers were given tips on how to tell stories to achieve objectives in their children’s cognitive development. Iman notes that no matter the age of the child that sits in her lap, they are all learning and they are all having fun while doing so.

Jordanian women have a lot to manage in their households. Although the national fertility rate in Jordan is 3.4 children per family, this number increases in rural settings. The PCP training empowers them with strategies to more effectively manage their large households. For example, mothers learn the importance of setting a healthy routine for their families. “I always knew what to eat, but I was not consciously planning meals based on nutrients and a balanced variety,” Iman said. She also noted the importance of setting a bedtime routine so that her children get enough sleep. She admitted that these strategies are not only important for her child’s development, but they also made her job as a mom easier.

Improved communication techniques at home can help children explore their curiosity and feel validated while doing so. As Jordan moves forward in its education reform efforts, teachers and parents are learning to encourage inquiry and promote higher order cognitive skills. When asked how they

**2,450 mothers around the Kingdom have participated in the program as of June 2013.**
previously communicated with their children, the mothers admitted to feeling bothered by their kids’ need for attention. Some confessed to beating their children when the mothers lost their tempers. After the training, they realized the consequences of these practices. Mothers are now aware that using a calm tone of voice, welcoming questions, and using words the child understands are appropriate ways to communicate.

The training for mothers included a session on how to make puppets as a fun way for children to aspire to be something when they grow up. For boys, these types of games allowed them to focus their spirited energy on a positive and self-improving aspiration. For girls, making puppets may have been the first time they were encouraged to dream about achieving something beyond what was readily possible.

The PCP program was a chance for Jordanian mothers to dream big too. For some, the training was a rare opportunity to leave the house and interact with others in their community. Iman, who lives in a remote area, said she loved interacting with other mothers. “I would like more opportunities to do these kinds of things,” she said. “We had the opportunity to listen to each other and be heard ourselves.” At first, some husbands were not supportive of their wives traveling outside the home to participate in such a training. However, after a few days, the mothers began to explain to their husbands the benefit of the program for themselves and their children. Little by little, husbands could see the changes in the household. By the end of the training, most mothers reported that their husbands fully supported their participation and have even discussed being a unified front when making decisions about their children.

The evidence is unmistakable that kindergarten or a similar early educational experience is crucial for learning and school readiness. Despite the short duration of the intervention, the evaluation found a positive impact on children’s learning readiness. However, the benefits of the training for mothers may be of greater note; mothers are the first, best teachers for every child, and have intrinsic motivation to invest their time and energy in their children’s learning readiness. The mothers have become more educated and more capable to create a home environment that is conducive to learning. This will not only benefit the child enrolling in first grade, but all the children in the household. “We sit together at the dinner table as a family,” says Iman. “I am in more control and I am happier. My happiness is certainly affecting all those around me.”

“I learned how to make home-made play dough. When Ahmed does not know a letter, I help him create the letter with the play dough. And then we walk around the house taking turns pointing out different items that start with that letter. Not only is it educational for Ahmed, but it has brought the two of us closer together.”